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ABSTRACT

Outlining current issues of educational concern as presented in national debates, this guide provides a format for discussion. The first chapter provides introductory and background information on four major areas believed to be the main responsibility of the schools. Each of these four issues is the subject of a separate chapter. Specifically, chapter 2 examines the school's role in teaching a core of academic subjects to produce adults capable of functioning efficiently. Chapter 3 examines the preparation of students for the modern workplace; the school's main responsibility is seen as being to provide all students with marketable skills to compete in a technological world. The school's fundamental obligations to meet the learning needs of all of our students are described in chapter 4, while chapter 5 presents the argument that the schools should reflect the "social goals" we value. Finally, chapter 6 describes the first step to educational reform as being the articulation of priorities. A questionnaire on the topic of education is included for readers to take before and after reading the document. (BJD)

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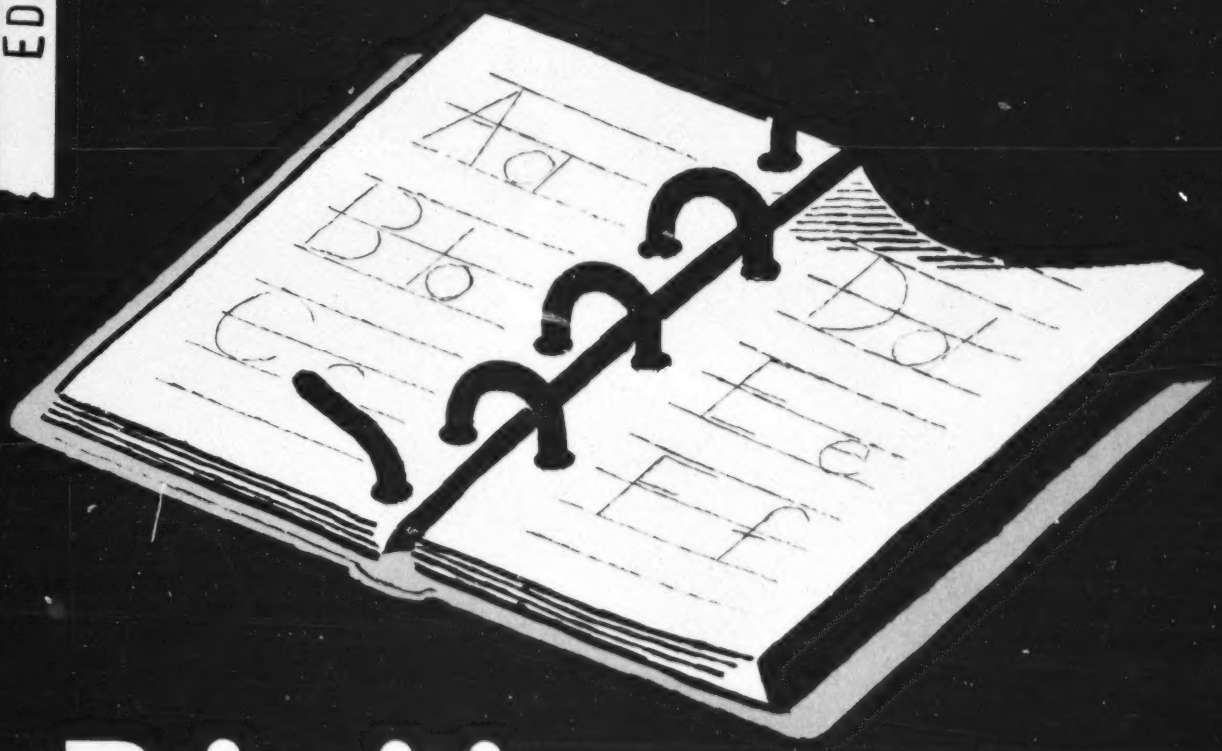
NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM

There's growing concern about America's schools, about what they teach, and what students learn

★ What should be the schools' main task?

★ What do they need to do the job?

An open discussion for concerned citizens



Priorities For the Nation's Schools

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

As you begin to read this issue book from the Domestic Policy Association, you are joining thousands of Americans who are participating, in communities all over the country, in the 1983 season of the National Issues Forum. This is a collaborative effort to achieve an ambitious goal: to bring Americans together every year to address urgent domestic issues.

This series was conceived and organized by the Domestic Policy Association, which represents the pooled resources of a nationwide network of organizations—including libraries and colleges, museums and membership groups, service clubs and community organizations. It is a nonpartisan effort that does not advocate any specific solution or point of view. Its interest is in exploring, in unbiased fashion, the costs and benefits of various alternatives.

The forums are an occasion in which people can get together to learn more about the issues and the options this nation faces, to air their differences, and to begin to identify their common ground. What took place this past year in the inaugural season of the National Issues Forum indicates how many Americans are eager to do just that.

But the National Issues Forum doesn't begin and end in those local meetings. The DPA schedules a series of meetings in which the views that emerge from these forums are conveyed to elected leaders. This past February, at the Gerald R. Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, former Presidents Ford and Carter presided over a meeting attended by a distinguished group of individuals who have helped to devise public policy and to lead the nation in recent years. They gathered together to examine what came out of last year's community forums. This coming March, the same kind of gathering will take place in Austin, Texas, at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

What will happen there is that once again a group of national leaders will sit down to examine what the community forums have yielded. They are interested in your considered judgment about each of the three topics for this year's forums. So that your feelings and thoughts about these issues can be conveyed in those meetings, we have provided a short "Issue Report" at the beginning and end of these books. I urge you to fill it out and mail it back to us.

We have prepared issue books like this one for each of the three topics that will be addressed in this year's forums: priorities for the nation's schools, nuclear arms and national security, and the deficit and the federal budget. These are urgent issues that have been prominent in the news. In each of these areas, new realities have to be faced, and important choices made. To address them is to raise serious questions about our values and priorities; they cannot be viewed only from the perspective of particular interests or partisan politics.

Helping citizens to engage in community discussions about what is in the public interest is the goal of the Domestic Policy Association. As the editor of these issue books, I'm honored to welcome you to this common effort.

Keith Melville

Keith Melville
Editor-in-Chief
The National Issues Forum

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM

1. PRIORITIES FOR THE NATION'S SCHOOLS REPORT

The Domestic Policy Association has promised to communicate a sense of your thinking on the topic of education to leaders and policy-makers, locally and at the national level. Therefore, we'd like you to fill out this short questionnaire so that we can get a "profile" of the way people here are thinking about this important issue. They are also going to be interested in the way that forums like this help us all to "think through" such complex problems.

For that reason, we'd like you to answer one set of questions *BEFORE* you talk with your fellow citizens at the forum meeting (or before you read this booklet, if you buy it elsewhere), and another set of questions *AFTER* the forum (or after you've read and thought about the booklet).

The leader at the forum meeting will ask you to hand in these question sheets at the beginning and at the end of the meeting. If it is inconvenient to do that, or if you can't attend the meeting, please send the questionnaire, together with the questionnaire at the end of the booklet, to the DPA in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Here is a list of things that some people say are not receiving the right amount of emphasis in our schools today. For each item, indicate whether you think it should receive more or less emphasis than it is currently getting, or is the amount of emphasis it is now receiving about right? (Check the appropriate box)

	More	About Right	Less	Not Sure
1. Making sure there is discipline in the classroom — Should this receive more or less emphasis, or is the emphasis it is receiving now about right?	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Higher pay for teachers — more or less emphasis, or about the same as it gets now?	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Homework — more or less emphasis, or about the same as it gets now?	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. The basics, such as reading and writing	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Sports and extracurricular activities	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Improving the equipment in science labs	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Using computers and other new technologies of the future	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. Teaching practical skills such as home economics and drivers' education	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Making sure teachers are qualified	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Teaching basic values such as the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Attention to students with special needs such as the handicapped or students with learning disabilities	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. Attention to students who are intellectually gifted	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. Bilingual instruction, especially in communities with large Spanish-speaking populations	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. Teaching job-related skills like how to write a resume	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. Teaching students life skills such as how to be a responsible parent	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. Teaching students science and math	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. How much, if anything, would you be willing to pay in additional taxes every year if that money were used exclusively for education? Would you be willing to pay: (Check the appropriate box)

- ☐ a. About $100.00 per year in new taxes if that money were used exclusively for education
- ☐ b. About $50.00 per year
- ☐ c. I would not be willing to pay more taxes each year if the money were used exclusively for education.
- ☐ d. Not sure/Don't know

II Suppose that more money were to become available exclusively for education and you could decide how that money would be spent. Below is a list of programs and educational activities where you can increase funding. However, you can target no more than *three* of these for increased resources. Which, if any, would you select? (CHECK NO MORE THAN THREE)

- ☐ 18. Teachers' salaries
- ☐ 19. Programs for students needing bilingual instruction
- ☐ 20. Computer purchase and instruction
- ☐ 21. Helping students prepare for the workplace
- ☐ 22. Programs for students with learning disabilities
- ☐ 23. Programs for practical learning such as home economics, auto mechanics, and drivers' education
- ☐ 24. More emphasis on the basics such as reading and math
- ☐ 25. Magnet schools and special programs for the intellectually gifted
- ☐ 26. Extending the school year
- ☐ 27. More emphasis on science

III Here are four possible candidates for the head of the school system in your community:

Candidate A wants to make sure that every graduate can read and do basic math — even if other priorities have to be ignored.

Candidate B wants the school to buy computers and teach students how to work with them — even if this means a de-emphasis on basic skills

Candidate C would provide special instruction for slow learners, the intellectually gifted, and those who need bilingual instruction — even if this means taking away resources from other programs.

Candidate D feels that because of the break-up of so many families and the declining influence of our churches, the schools should teach basic values such as the difference between right and wrong and the responsibilities of good citizenship, and also place more emphasis on teaching practical skills such as home economics, auto mechanics, and drivers' education.

28. Which candidate would you like to see in charge of your community's schools?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

29. Which candidate would you *least* like to see in charge of your community's schools?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

30. What about for the country as a whole? Which candidate would you like to see as U.S. Secretary of Education?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

31. Which candidate would you *least* like to see as U.S. Secretary of Education?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

IV These last few questions are for statistical purposes only:

32. Which of these age groups are you in? Check the appropriate box.

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18 to 29
- ☐ 30 to 44
- ☐ 45 to 64
- ☐ 65 and over

33. What is the last grade of school you completed?

- ☐ 8th grade or less
- ☐ 1 to 3 years of high school
- ☐ High school graduate
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ College grad. or more

34. Are you registered as a Democrat, Republican, an Independent, or are you not registered to vote?

- ☐ Democrat
- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Independent
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Not registered to vote

35. What was your total family income for 1982?

- ☐ Under $10,000
- ☐ $10,000 to $20,000
- ☐ $20,000 to $30,000
- ☐ $30,000 to $40,000
- ☐ $40,000 to $50,000
- ☐ Over $50,000

36. Do you have children below the age of 18?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

37. Are you male or female?

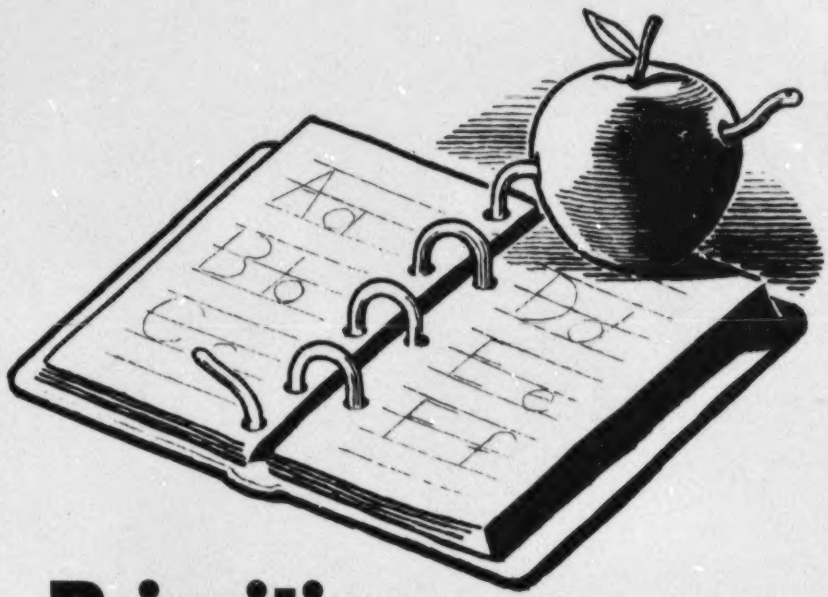
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female

38. What is your zip code? _____

39. Which of the following DPA activities did you participate in?

- ☐ Read the booklet
- ☐ Attended a forum
- ☐ Read the discussion guide
- ☐ None of the above

NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM



Priorities For the Nation's Schools

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The Domestic Policy Association is a nonprofit, nonpartisan association devoted to raising the level of public awareness and discussion about important public issues. It consists of a nationwide network of institutions — colleges and universities, libraries, service clubs, membership groups and civic organizations — that bring citizens together to discuss public issues. The DPA represents their joint effort to enhance what they already do by working with a common schedule and common materials. In addition to convening meetings each fall in hundreds of communities in every region of the country, the DPA also convenes meetings at which it brings citizens and national leaders together to discuss these issues and the outcome of community forums.

Each year, participating institutions select the topics that will be discussed in the Issue Forums. On behalf of the Domestic Policy Association, the Public Agenda Foundation — a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization that devises and tests new means of taking national issues to the public — prepares issue books and discussion guides for use in these forums. The Domestic Policy Association welcomes questions about the program, and invites individuals and organizations interested in joining this network to write to: The Domestic Policy Association, 5335 Far Hills Avenue, Dayton, Ohio 45429.

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"If the schools try to do everything, it's likely that they won't do anything very well. The first step toward educational reform is to decide upon priorities."

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1

WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE NATION'S SCHOOLS?

> "There's growing concern about the state of American education, but there's not much agreement about what should be done."

This past May, 1300 high school seniors in Florida were denied their diplomas. They had failed a state exam that tested their literacy. Their low scores showed that they were functional illiterates, which means that their reading skills were no higher than a fifth grade level. According to Florida state law, the schools had no alternative but to hold them back for another year.

Those high school seniors, their parents and a great many other people who heard about the incident were stunned. These youths had spent twelve years in the public schools, yet tests showed that they were functionally illiterate. What had been happening during those 12,000 hours they had spent in the classroom? And who was to blame for their failure? Surely those students who couldn't meet the state standards deserved some of the blame. But weren't the schools at least equally at fault? Isn't it their responsibility, after all, to provide a good education?

The parents of some of the students who were denied diplomas were in fact so angry that they have taken the state to court and plan to appeal the case, if necessary, all the way to the Supreme Court. They contend that the schools failed in their obligation to provide the education necessary to meet the minimum requirements defined by the state. Essentially, their argument is that if the state has the power to set such standards, then it also has the obligation to teach students so that they can meet those standards.

What took place in Florida is only one example among many suggesting that something is going wrong with the schools. There is dissatisfaction in many quarters. School systems in many communities are suffering both from declining enrollments and a perceptible lack of esprit in the classroom. With falling enrollments goes a falling budget in many districts — though the cost of modern equipment is higher now than ever. And as the spirit in the classroom deteriorates, we hear increasingly of teacher burnout, the classroom equivalent of shellshock. Parents are paying more in taxes to support the local schools, but in many communities there is a sense that they are getting less and less for those tax dollars. More generally, there is a vague sense that as a nation we have allowed our standards to slip, and that if a sense of pride in achievement and the pursuit of excellence are to be restored, then that must begin to happen in the schools.

All of a sudden this past spring, it seemed as if a great many people simultaneously turned their attention to the schools, and what they saw provided cause for concern. A report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education — entitled, significantly, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* — warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the public schools and called for tougher standards, higher pay for teachers, more homework, stricter discipline, and the return to a basic core curriculum for all high school students. "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this

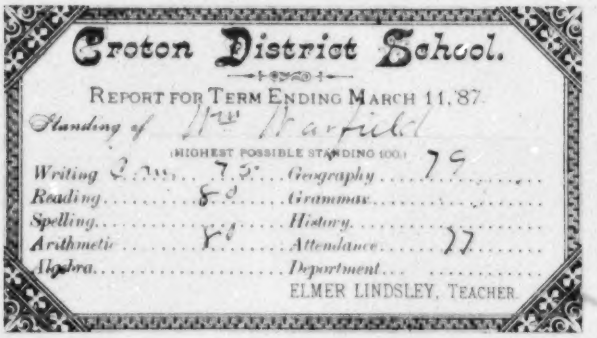
Pat Oliphant Courtesy *Time* Magazine

"Candidates for the 1984 election have made the nation's schools one of the chief issues in the campaign."

to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." Judging from that report's reception, it apparently hit a nerve and confirmed what a lot of people had been thinking.

For the first time in a generation, for the first time since the Soviet Union launched its Sputnik in 1957 and triggered off a wave of self-scrutiny in this country about the shortcomings of the schoools, education is once again a major issue. Sensing the public's real concern about it, the candidates for the 1984 election are moving quickly to establish this as one of the main topics of the campaign. Walter Mondale, for example, one of the Democratic candidates, is proposing a substantial increase in Federal spending for education, while President Reagan has made it clear that he favors a return to some basic tasks in education, and merit pay for teachers. As he put it in a speech this spring, "I have a feeling that the generation that went through World War II thought it ought to make things easier for the children." But now, he said, there's a sense that perhaps the time has come to put the starch back in education. "Don't we have to look deeper for some of the answers to the problems we have in education?" he asked.

But if there are desperately needed reforms in the nation's educational efforts, what exactly is it that needs to be done?



Croton District School.

REPORT FOR TERM ENDING MARCH 11, 87.

Standing of Wm Warfield

(HIGHEST POSSIBLE STANDING 100.)

Writing	7.5	Geography	79
Reading	82	Grammar	
Spelling		History	
Arithmetic	80	Attendance	77
Algebra		Department	

ELMER LINDSLEY, TEACHER.

The Bettmann Archive Inc.

"We are in the midst of an educational reform movement of epochal proportions. Its impetus comes not from the federal government or the teaching profession, but from the people."
—Chester E. Finn, Jr.

WHAT WE WANT OF THE SCHOOLS

There is a host of questions about school policies — questions about the amount of money needed to run good schools, about the source of that money, about the roles of public schools and private schools, the impact of teachers' unions, and so on — and each is worth thoughtful debate. But the purpose of this issue book and of these meetings of the National Issues Forum is to ask first a more basic question: What do we want the schools to do? What's the principal purpose of the schools? What should the schools' priorities be and how much can we expect them to do? It is easy to find fault with the schools for not doing enough of what we want them to do — or for not doing it well enough. It is easy to complain that education isn't what it should be, that it isn't what it used to be, or that we no longer have a commitment to educational "excellence." It is easy to place the blame for what appears to be the "decline" of the schools on indifferent or poorly prepared teachers, or on poorly motivated students, or on parents who don't support the schools. But not even the best of teachers can perform very well if there is no consensus about what the schools' priorities are, or what, exactly, "educational excellence" means. More money and better prepared teachers will help only when we are sure about what we want them to do.

Historically, we have asked the schools to do different things at different times — to teach kids "the three Rs" (reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic) so that they could cope in an energetically expanding young country, to create a sense of community among America's heterogeneous population, to "Americanize" the immigrants, to disseminate a core of academic knowledge to all students, to help them adjust to society's expectations, and so on. Recently, in the expansive, affluent, perhaps overconfident 1960s, we essentially asked the schools more and more to take on social tasks — and sometimes now it seems that we expect them to do everything all at once. The schools came to be regarded as the place where anything that went wrong in American society could be fixed. When President Lyndon Johnson boldly asserted that "the answer to all our national problems comes to a single word, and that word is education," he was speaking for many Americans.

But however well intended, the result has been a school system whose goals and commitments, like Topsy, just grew. "By the end of the 1960s," writes social critic George Leonard, "the public schools found themselves faced with an impossibly crowded agenda." His description of that agenda goes a long way toward explaining the problems that the schools face today. What the schools are expected to do, writes Leonard, is "not only to fulfill their original purpose of democratizing the entire nation by providing free education for all, not only to serve as the stirring spoon for the great American melting pot, not only to beat Russia in space and military technology, not only to satisfy young people's passion for social justice, not only to

Drawing by Stevenson; © 1983 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

"It's one thing for the National Commission to comment on the quality of teaching in our schools. It's another thing entirely for you to stand up and call Mr. Costello a yo-yo."

end poverty and racism, but also to free the human spirit and to create lifelong learners."

Today, the sense that the schools can or should do all those things is a little less sure than it used to be. To many thoughtful educators it has become increasingly clear that the schools cannot be everything to everybody. Some say they never could. But now the appearance of large numbers of public school graduates who can neither read nor write very well, the necessity of preparing students for an increasingly sophisticated workplace, and the challenge of maintaining a position of leadership in the world economy all combine to remind us that we must be clear about the central tasks of the schools. Then we may determine how to recruit and how to pay the teachers we need to do the job.

At the heart of all debates about the schools is a series of conflicting ideas about their goals. Some people believe that the schools should focus on a core of mainly academic subjects, designed simply to ensure that they produce adults capable of functioning efficiently in our modern world. Others think that a school's main responsibility is to prepare students for the modern workplace, to provide all of them with marketable skills, and to ensure that this nation as a whole can compete in an increasingly technological world. These people argue for a move away from the traditional curriculum to a new core curriculum that emphasizes the math, science and computer skills needed for the future. Yet another group emphasizes that the school is a place that ought to serve *all* students, helping them achieve their best no matter what their particular needs, abilities — or disabilities. Then there are still others who would put emphasis on the school's responsibility to prepare young people for responsible adult life — to maintain what we think of as the values that have always characterized our way of life. These different views and what they imply are the substance of this book.

HOW IT AFFECTS US

Few school systems are likely to subscribe to any one of these goals to the exclusion of all others, and there is room for honest disagreement about which of these four should be the schools' primary goal and how much of a commitment should be made to the others. But each of them does represent a distinctive

conception of what the schools' main task should be. And from each of these assumptions certain things follow about how taxpayers' dollars will be spent in the schools, about what kinds of teachers are required to meet that objective, and what students should be doing throughout most of the school day.

It is important to consider the cost of pursuing any one of these goals, not just the cost as measured by taxpayers' dollars, but also in the classroom hours it consumes, the retraining of teachers that it may require, and the other educational activities that it may replace. It simply may not be possible for the nation's schools to pursue all of these goals with equal commitment: the realities of American public education today urge on us the necessity of making choices.

Courtesy of National Education Association

"Finally, the question is one of purpose. There is simply not enough time and money to do everything. So we must agree about what the main goals of the nation's schools are, and then ask what is necessary to accomplish them."

So this issue book looks at just these four perspectives and explores why their proponents in each instance feel they are so important. The answer to the question of what the schools should be doing matters tremendously, both to the schools and to the country. If we cannot clarify our thinking about what we most want from the schools, we run the serious risk of fragmenting their efforts and diluting their effect. By asking the schools to do too many things, we may be undermining their ability to do anything very well.

Those choices are truly ours. Unlike public policy decisions that are made in Washington, decisions about the schools are made mostly in local communities. This is one of the distinguishing features of American public education. The overwhelming majority of our children go to public schools that reflect the values and the priorities of local communities. In most countries, the schools are a function of the national government. In France, for example, the Ministry of National Education in Paris directs teacher training and dictates the curriculum for schools throughout the country. But in America, things are different. There are over 80,000 public schools in this nation run by some 16,000 local school districts — almost all of which have the authority to levy their own taxes and set their own curricula. Every time that we vote on the school board members, go to PTA meetings, or pay local school taxes, we are involved quite directly in one of the most important activities that takes place in a community. And public discussion about what the federal government should do is more and more desirable when we see education as a national question.

What goes on in local schools affects virtually everything else that we do as a nation, which is the main reason why school taxes are levied on every member of the community, whether or not their children attend the schools. There is a public task being carried out in the schools, one that affects our ability to maintain the national defense and to sustain economic growth, one that affects the values that children affirm and their sense of self-esteem. For that reason, public discussions about what the schools should be doing are a matter of great practical importance.

Education is too important to be left to the professional educators. A generation ago, at the time of Sputnik, heightened concern led to effective action, and real change took place in the schools as a result. The fact that so many people are once again concerned about the schools, and ready to consider whether and how they might have to be improved, provides a real opportunity. But we need to do something more than point the finger of blame or repeat simplistic "solutions." We need to start talking once again about what the priorities of the nation's schools should be. Then we may be able to face what it will cost to do the job, who it will take to do the job, where the job has to be done — in the public school or not — and how long a school year might take to complete it.

2

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO READING, WRITING, AND ARITHMETIC?

A young man who worked for Amtrak helping to prepare food was due for a severe reprimand. He had burned a number of roasts so badly that they had to be thrown out. The young man was otherwise diligent and responsible, and seemed to care about his job. What was wrong? It turned out that the young man, a high school graduate, could barely read. Unable to follow the printed instructions, he had prepared the food at the wrong oven temperature. Along with the reprimand, Amtrak arranged for a course in remedial reading.

The young man's illiteracy is not an isolated instance of someone who slipped through eight years of grade school and four years of high school without adequately mastering the basic skill of reading. This symptom of poor schooling is legion. Thirteen percent of the students graduating from high school — more than one in ten — have the reading and writing skills of sixth graders.

Today, every major institution into which high school graduates move after their twelve years of education is experiencing an influx of young men and women who simply cannot read or write well enough to do their work. The military spends some $60 million annually to teach its servicemen and women how to read. The Navy reports that one quarter of its recent recruits cannot understand written safety instructions. A growing portion of the $30 billion that industry spends on education each year goes for remedial help. Colleges, which might be assumed to get more able students, fare no better: between 25 to 40 percent of their freshmen need remedial help. Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate.

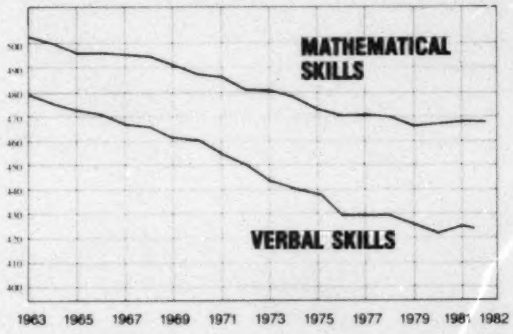
Why this widespread illiteracy? Aren't the schools doing their job?

> "We owe it to ourselves as a nation to produce adults who can read intelligently, think precisely, speak fluently, write clearly and compute accurately. That alone is a big enough task for the schools to handle."

Teresa Fasolino

REPORT CARD

THE DECLINE OF SCHOLASTIC APTITUTE TEST SCORES 1963-1982



From 1963 to 1983, average S.A.T. scores on both verbal and mathematical skills dropped substantially.

"We must stop cheating young people, pretending they have learned when they haven't. You and I both know of high school graduates who can't read a newspaper or a driver's license test."
—Gov. James Hunt

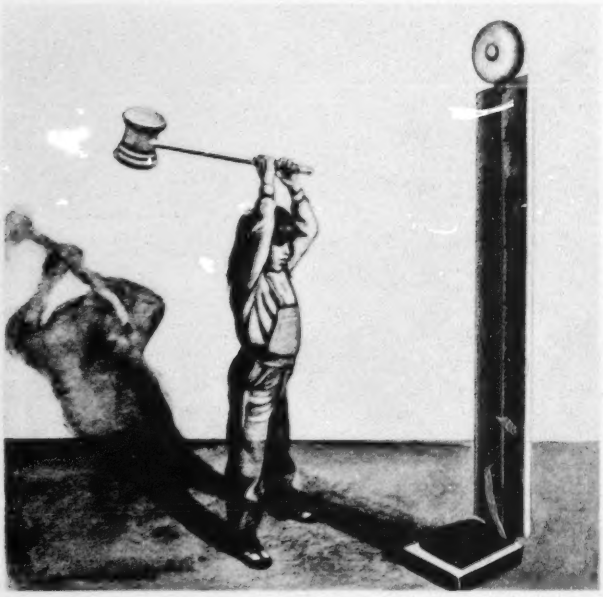
To many people, the answer is a clear no. The basic job of the schools, they believe, is precisely to impart to students the fundamental academic skills that are the building blocks for any future advancement — in education, at the workplace, indeed, in ordinary, everyday life. And this is what the schools have not done. They have failed, say these critics, at what should be their highest priority, the priority of teaching academic skills and knowledge. As a result, many young people — like the young man who works for Amtrak — are handicapped by severe academic disabilities.

THE DECLINE OF ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE

To the people who insist that the schools are nothing if they do not focus on the essential academic skills, what has been happening in American education is quite alarming. The extensive efforts now being made by non-academic organizations to upgrade the skills of high school graduates are only one indication of the problem. A second is the declining scores on national tests of reading and mathematics. These scores began to drop in the early 1960s, and most of them have continued steadily downward through the late '60s and '70s.

Consider the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, taken by most high school juniors and seniors who plan to attend college. The SATs, as these exams are called, test students on their mathematical skills and on their reading and language skills. From 1963 to 1981, the average mathematics score dropped from 502 to 466, (out of a possible 800), while the average score on the test of verbal skills dropped from 478 to 424 (again out of a possible 800), a decline of more than 50 points. Last year the average scores stopped their decline and took a slight upward turn, but the difference between the test results of high school graduates today and those in the early 1960's is still wide. There may, of course, be many reasons for this. More students of widely differing backgrounds take the tests than used to. Undoubtedly most of them read less — and have watched television more. And they may have grown up in a family and world whose lifestyle, values and goals have changed from those of earlier generations. But the fact nonetheless seems undeniable; college-bound graduates today don't have such well developed academic skills as their counterparts did 20 years ago.

Two recent assessments of American public education focus on such findings and respond with urgent dismay. The National Commission report that we quoted in the opening chapter of this issue book put its conclusion so vividly that it became headline news. A second assessment comes from education writer Paul Cooperman, who concludes that the decline in scores represents a sobering new trend in American history: "Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of the country, the educational skills of one gen-



Teresa Fasolino

eration will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents."

In short, Americans appear to be becoming academically less capable instead of more. And if something is not done about the schools, the next generation may be less capable yet — because this generation will provide the parents and the teachers for the next.

CUTTING AWAY THE FRILLS

To the advocates of core academics, the heart of the problem is that the schools have tried to do too much — yet perhaps demanded too little of students. They have enlarged the curriculum with an array of non-academic activities and electives — and as the non-academics increased, the time available for academics decreased. "Twenty-five percent of the credits earned by general track high school students," the National Commission reports, "are in physical and health education, work experience outside the school, remedial English and mathematics, and personal service and development courses, such as training for adulthood and marriage."

As the emphasis on academics began to slacken throughout the school systems, standards began to drop. The schools allowed students, in effect, to determine their own education — in unstructured, so-called open classrooms in grade school, and by choosing from a smorgasboard of non-academic electives in high school. Children in grade school and high school were automatically promoted to the next higher grade, year after year, regardless of what they learned. In this way, a student who had not mastered a reading skill in the fourth or fifth grade,

SETTING COMPETENCY STANDARDS

In 1977, Arizona was the only state that said that its high school seniors had to pass a competency exam in order to graduate. Today, 16 additional states have established such a requirement, and in all 36 states use competency tests to examine the achievement of their students.

The demand for minimum competency standards has spread as a grassroots development. No two exams are alike; different states test students at different points in their elementary and secondary education; some states set the standards at the state level, others—in which the standards tend to be lower—at the local level.

For all these differences, practically every competency text emphasizes reading and mathematics. "To the average citizen," writes a policy analyst for the Denver-based Education Commission of the States, "the epitome of the problem is the student who can hardly read and write and yet graduates from high school with a standard diploma." The introduction of competency requirements has largely come from state legislatures—which resond to the pressures of voters—and not from professional educators.

The setting of competency standards may also be spreading to teachers. In at least two states—Florida and Iowa—the state legislatures have mandated that teachers must pass a competency test showing that "they can write in a logical and understandable style with appropriate grammar and sentence structure and can comprehend and work with fundamental math concepts." In Florida this law was passed over the strong opposition of the National Education Association, an organization that speaks for teachers.

To an important extent, the competency movement is an example of a new educational direction that has been set in response to popular rather than professional demands.

The Bettmann Archive Inc.

"He who ne'er learns his ABCs,
Forever will a blockhead be.
But he who learns his letters fair,
Shall have a coach to take the air."
—*The New England Primer*, 1790

simply carried this inadequacy through to high school graduation. Colleges, for their part, lowered their entrance requirements in various ways, such as dropping the foreign language requirement. This had the ripple effect of weakening high schools even more, for they no longer had the support of colleges in asserting the worth, for example, of learning foreign languages.

To the advocates of core academics, the solution to the problem is equally clear: Cut away frills, the things that are academically irrelevant; restore academics to the center of the curriculum, and then make sure — through rigorous evaluations — that students master the curriculum. The basic principles of this approach have been stated succinctly by Admiral Hyman G. Rickover: "There should be a return to the ideal of a truly liberal education based on the three R's, which results in the ability to read intelligently, to think precisely, to speak fluently, and to write clearly. Mandatory academic courses must be given priority over electives. A nationwide system of standardized performance exams through the student's school years should be established." A principal of a Palo Alto grade school that puts its central emphasis on academics has an even briefer formulation: "The children are in school for education and not for all sorts of other things, even if they are worthwhile things."

Consider, for example, the following:

— In the Soviet Union, five million high school students take calculus, compared to about 100,000 American students who do so.

— In Japan, 94 percent of the students in high school graduate compared to only 74 percent in the United States. Because of longer school days and a longer school year, graduates of Japanese high schools have the equivalent of approximately four more years of school than do high school graduates in the United States.

— In many industrialized countries, students start courses in chemistry, physics, biology, geography, and a level of mathematics higher than arithmetic or general mathematics in the 12th grade. By the end of high school, they have spent about three times as many class hours in these subject areas compared to United States students who have four years of science and math in high school.

— In recent international comparisons of student achievement in 19 academic areas, American students did not place first or second in any of those areas. They placed last among industrial nations in seven of those areas.

The moral seems clear: If we want to maintain our position of leadership in the world community, we are going to have to work at it. And that work has to begin in the nation's schools.

But what does a school that concentrates on academics look like? How does it differ from a school that balances academics with other kinds of activities and courses? No two schools are exactly alike, but here are three examples:

★ At Myers Park Traditional Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina, the curriculum concentrates on reading, mathematics, spelling, grammar, composition, and other language skills. Physical education, social sciences, and health as well as science are also taught, but they are treated as secondary subjects.

★ At San Anselmo School in San Jose, California, homework is assigned five nights a week. The school gives assignments in reading and language skills on Monday and Wednesday, in mathematics on Tuesday and Thursday, and assigns an essay on Friday.

★ At Benjamin Franklin Elementary School in Mesa, Arizona, the social studies course, according to the school's principal, is "more concerned about teaching where Miami is than about Miami's problems."

At the high school level, a "basics" curriculum has been outlined by the President of Tufts College, Jean Mayer. He proposes, first of all, that the high school year be lengthened — to 44 weeks — leaving an eight-week summer vacation. Each school week would be forty hours long, and, leaving aside time for lunch and periods between classes, would consist of thirty-five 50-minute "hours." Twenty five of these hours, according to Mayer, would be devoted to required subjects: five hours on English, five hours on mathematics, five hours on history, five hours on the sciences, and five hours on foreign languages, music and art. The remaining ten hours would be devoted to a limited group of electives — among them, physical education, vocational courses, and additional courses in music and art.

In all of these programs, the focus is on core academics; other subjects may be taught, but not instead of the basic skills. For the advocates of this approach, the schools are places for learning that will produce students with a solid grasp of basic intellectual skills.

Their rationale is simple. Some graduates will later learn career skills in the workplace; some will go on to advanced study in a great many different fields; many will eventually have more than one career. But they cannot do any of these things or function effectively as adults in the complex modern world until they have learned to handle words and numbers, until they have a picture of where they stand in relation to the U.S., other people, and the physical universe. And only at school can they learn how to master new knowledge in a steady, methodical, disciplined way. That — and pretty well only that — is what school should be all about.

TESTING THE STUDENTS

Most advocates of this approach also strongly favor the regular testing of students to see if they are mastering their material. In some 39 states such testing is built around minimum competency regulations. These regulations (often they are laws) set standards that all students must reach. If they do not pass these minimum competency tests, students may either be held back to repeat the year of schooling or must accept tutorial assistance until they pass the test that allows them to move on. These tests do not reflect a shared definition of what "minimum competency" means: the definition of "minimum competency" can vary. Some focus on reading skills. Others include mathematical and scientific knowledge. Some operate at selected primary and secondary grades, and serve as "gates" to the next grade. Some serve as the "gate" to graduation. But their aim is always

Courtesy of the National Education Association

Are courses in drivers' education unnecessary "frills"—time-consuming distractions from the schools' main tasks?

the same — to see to it that every student has mastered the basic academic skills that are the primary business of the school.

The results of such an approach have in many instances been notable. One example is the school system in Fairfax County, Virginia. That school system first began establishing grade objectives in 1974. By 1980, the average score achieved by its fourth graders rose in reading from the 69th to the 75th national percentile and in mathematics from the 57th to the 75th percentile. The assistant superintendent for instructional services, Mary Anne Lecos, reports: "We made great efforts in the basic skills. We defined objectives at each grade, invested heavily in teacher training and put a big emphasis on teaching students to write."

For the advocates of core academics, this is how a school can and should work.

THE COSTS OF CORE ACADEMICS

But the approach has its costs, and in some people's eyes it carries its own risks. Some people feel that too narrow a focus on basic academic skills is not in the best interest of students because it means leaving too much out of the school program that is worthwhile. More basic courses mean less time for other kinds. In many communities, there is strong support for courses -- such as women's studies, or Afro-American history, for example — that help students to understand particular aspects of their heritage. Similarly, many people feel that a regular sports program is important because it helps students to develop their individual skills, learn to be part of a team, and cope with competition and loss. Focusing on academic skills would mean reducing or eliminating or severely curtailing such courses as consumer education, driver education, home economics, life skills — courses designed to give students an awareness of modern society and the skills and attitudes it requires. This "social service" by the schools represents a long American tradition and its defenders argue that no institution can effectively pick up the tasks if the schools drop them. (We shall pick up this issue in Chapter 5.)

As for the students, the core academic approach demands regular homework and expects students to accept the authority of the schools to shape their education. Yet family after family, district after district, court after court has rejected the old "spare the rod and spoil the child" philosophy that permitted teachers to use physical discipline in the classroom; and nowadays, social observers doubt that the schools any longer have the moral authority to keep their students hard at work. Like other institutions in society — the church, government, even the family — the school hasn't the prestige it once held. In many instances children no longer have a family structure that supports and reinforces the need for homework and the acceptance of authority and supervision.

A third reservation about focusing on basic academic skills is of a different order. Critics say it shuts out both the gifted and the special student. They will have no place for the gifted or the special student. Schools that direct their energies at raising everyone to a common level may not be able at the same time to encourage excellence. Minimum skills have a way of becoming maximum skills when the school's goal is to help students pass a minimum competency test.

Others, like New York City's Commissioner of Education, Anthony J. Alvarado, have exactly the opposite worry. He fears for the fate of the less able student — but he is responding to the same concern. Commissioner Alvarado points out,

> We have a drop-out rate of 25 percent for the nation, 45 percent for New York City. If we're just to increase standards and make more demands without carefully reviewing what the implication of that is to the drop-out rate, we're

going to increase . . . the numbers of minority students who are going to continue not to make it.

Both points of view highlight an important challenge for the public schools in a democracy — and the option of providing different kinds of education for different kinds of students is one we shall have to wrestle with before we make a judgment on the public school question.

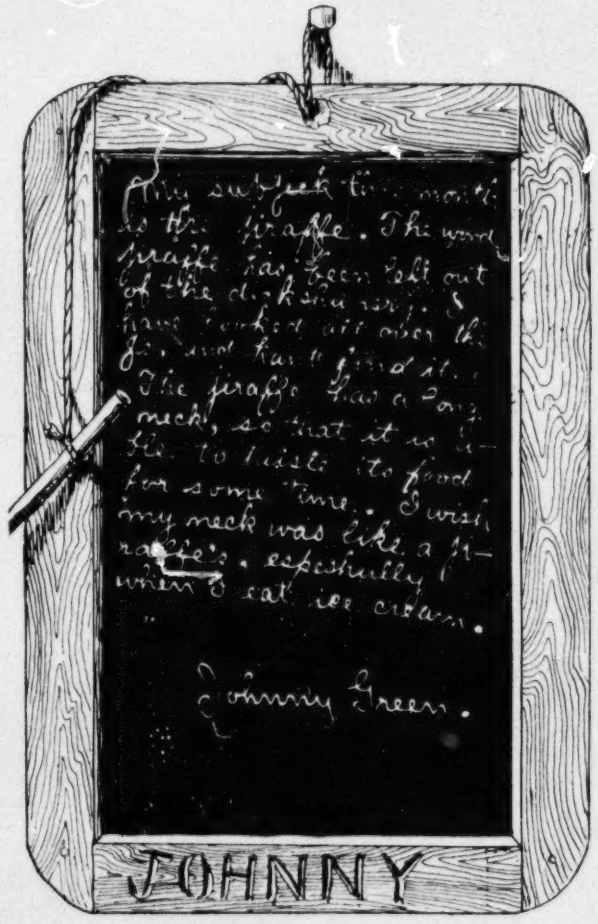
A fourth reservation points to the problem of finding people capable of teaching even these basic skills at appropriate levels, of paying them for working a longer school year, and of retraining those who now teach the subjects that aren't central. These are problems of training, problems of financing.

Several concerns about teachers have been raised: Are teachers of subjects that do not fit into the category of core academics to be fired? And where will the teachers of core academics come from? Where will the additional math and science teachers come from? How can the skills of current teachers be upgraded?

We obviously cannot improve the teaching of basic academic skills unless we can recruit and hold teachers who are themselves good enough to do the job. Yet Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, has pointed out that many states do not require qualifying tests for teachers entering the profession, and some of those that do set the passing mark so low that many who become teachers are at the same level of competence as the students they are supposed to teach. "Many who are now going into elementary school teaching do not themselves know the arithmetic they will need to teach their students . . . and perhaps can't themselves read well enough to produce students who read." Similarly, the National Commission found that "half of the newly employed mathematics, science and English teachers are not qualified to teach these subjects." "This society's brightest and best," reports a writer in the *Teacher's College Record*, "are not entering teaching."

What keeps them out is partly the quality of life in the schools — teaching is a demanding and tiring profession — and partly salaries that are not competitive. As a report to the Southern Region Education Board observed, "When beginning salaries offered to baccalaureates in business administration average $17,500, starting salaries at the $13,000 level are not going to attract many superior individuals into teaching." Nor are the prospects for advancement good enough to keep ambitious individuals in the classroom. Even without raising the quality of instruction and extending the school year the cost of improving basic education seems prohibitive.

Those questions of how much to pay, and where to find the money, are even more dramatically apparent to those who think of the schools as places where new technologies, rather than long-held basics are key features of the syllabus. That is a point of view to which we now turn.



"People cannot function effectively as adults in the modern world unless they have learned to handle words and numbers. Only at school can students acquire these basic skills in a disciplined way."

3

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND A NEW DEFINITION OF LITERACY

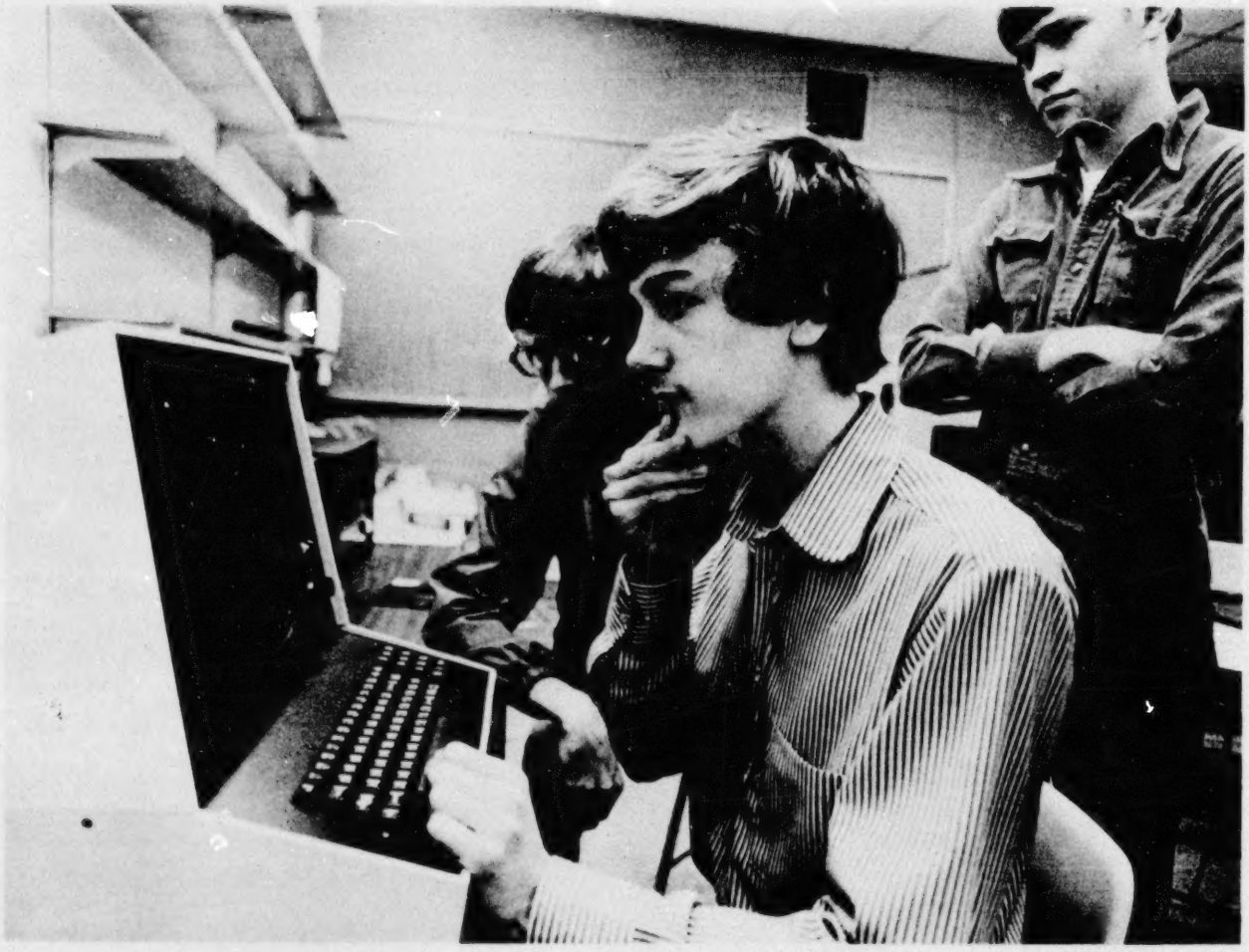
> "At a time when technology is shaping the future, the schools have to keep up. We need to compete with the best in the world."

Shortly after Luis Pereira entered high school in Newark, New Jersey, he read in a guidance brochure that the way to get ahead in America was to learn about computers. Luis took the message to heart and entered the school's computer programming course. He became engrossed in what he was learning. He told his friends that he wanted to learn "machine language." Today, a high school senior, he continues to pursue his interest in computers and is something of an oddity among his friends and the 2200 students of his high school. He is, one segment of the educational community would say, riding the wave of the future. A decade from now, he may have a real advantage over his more traditionally educated peers. As one advocate of focusing public education on the new technology writes: "Our schools are continuing to teach skills that are already obsolete. It is as though we were in the period just after the invention of the Gutenberg press, and our schools were still training students in penmanship for the purpose of copying manuscripts."

It is true that when the printing press was invented the nature of learning changed. People no longer learned mainly by what was orally transmitted from teacher to student. People were no longer dependent on remembering the spoken word. From that point on, texts could be produced in many copies and the printed word could be stored in a library. In the same way, the computer has changed learning and teaching and redefined the skills people need. And there are some people who feel, therefore, that a public education system that does not move into the future by recognizing this transformation will become increasingly irrelevant to the world we live in. It will be failing its students and its society.

One of the strongest arguments for placing the new technologies at the center of American public education is that there is a direct link between our technological skills and America's position in the world economy. Industry now depends upon the computer and the microchip, advocates of the new technologies argue. A newspaper ad placed by United Technologies makes the case clearly: "A battle for the future is being waged in the classrooms of the world — and America is losing. At a time when technology is shaping the future, American education is producing technological illiterates. Historians of the future may well look back on what has happened to American education as the equivalent of unilateral economic disarmament. Our educational deficiencies must be remedied, lest we find ourselves becoming a second-rate economy."

The arguments for computer-centered and "high tech" education are, in the first instance, those long advanced for vocational and career education: one of the fundamental obligations of the school is to prepare young people to take their place usefully in the world of work. Very rapidly the marketplace is being transformed by computer and related technologies; and high school graduates of the eighties and nineties will almost inevitably work with high technology whether they be-



Courtesy of the National Education Association

come secretaries, engineers or academics. But that is only a part of the argument — and in fact many educators are nowadays critical of the vocational aspects of the high school curriculum. Apprenticeship in a career, they argue, is better undertaken in the workplace than the school — and programs of internships, early graduation, and instruction by professionals who are not themselves school teachers are subjects of experiment and debate in a number of school districts.

The proponents of more demanding scientific and technological study in the school emphasize, rather, the nature the modern world and the demands of the international market place. Quite simply, scientific and computer literacy today, they say, is as indispensable as were "the three R's" when the public schools were started more than a hundred years ago — or a mastery of the English language, when waves of immigrants from Europe were prepared by the schools for the new world.

Those who stress the importance of the new technologies agree with the advocates of core academics that the performance of American public education is unsatisfactory. But as the ad from United Technologies suggests, they argue that we need to

"Schools should assure a measure of technological literacy —especially in computers, an awareness of how economies function, and a broad exposure to careers and work. This would provide the best preparation for productive, satisfying work."

—John Goodlad

CAN THE COMPUTER BE PROGRAMMED FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS?

Any school that wants to make computers a major component in its educational program—not only to teach computer science but to teach *other* subjects—faces three serious problems.

The first and most obvious is costs. A textbook costs, say, $20.00, while a personal (or micro) computer averages $500 or $600. The computer is not the only cost. The school also needs software, the material that programs the computer to teach a subject.

The second problem is personnel. Where will the teachers who can use and teach the computer come from? Some educators believe that the schools need to train their own computer staffs through various in-service programs. They argue that people who already are skilled in computers most likely work for industry, and the schools cannot offer competitive salaries. One answer, then, is in-service training. Another is special Federal funding.

There is a third problem—the problem of getting teachers to use the computer. The current generation of teachers is not computer-oriented. Many have no interest in the computer, and some are antagonistic to it. A high school in a Chicago suburb installed eight microcomputers, provided voluntary in-service training for its teachers, and after a year studied who was using the computer. The school found that only a small percentage of the faculty was using the computer and that these teachers came from subject areas that traditionally are associated with computers—science, mathematics, business, and industrial arts. The study concluded: "A substantial number of the faculty may offer excuses, such as lack of training, time, and available software, in an attempt to rationalize an overriding lack of desire to change their established teaching routines." You can bring a teacher to the new technology, but you may not be able to get the teacher to plug it in.

judge the performance of our schools against the standard of what other countries are doing and what our country is going to need in the years ahead.

THE COMPUTER KEY TO EDUCATION

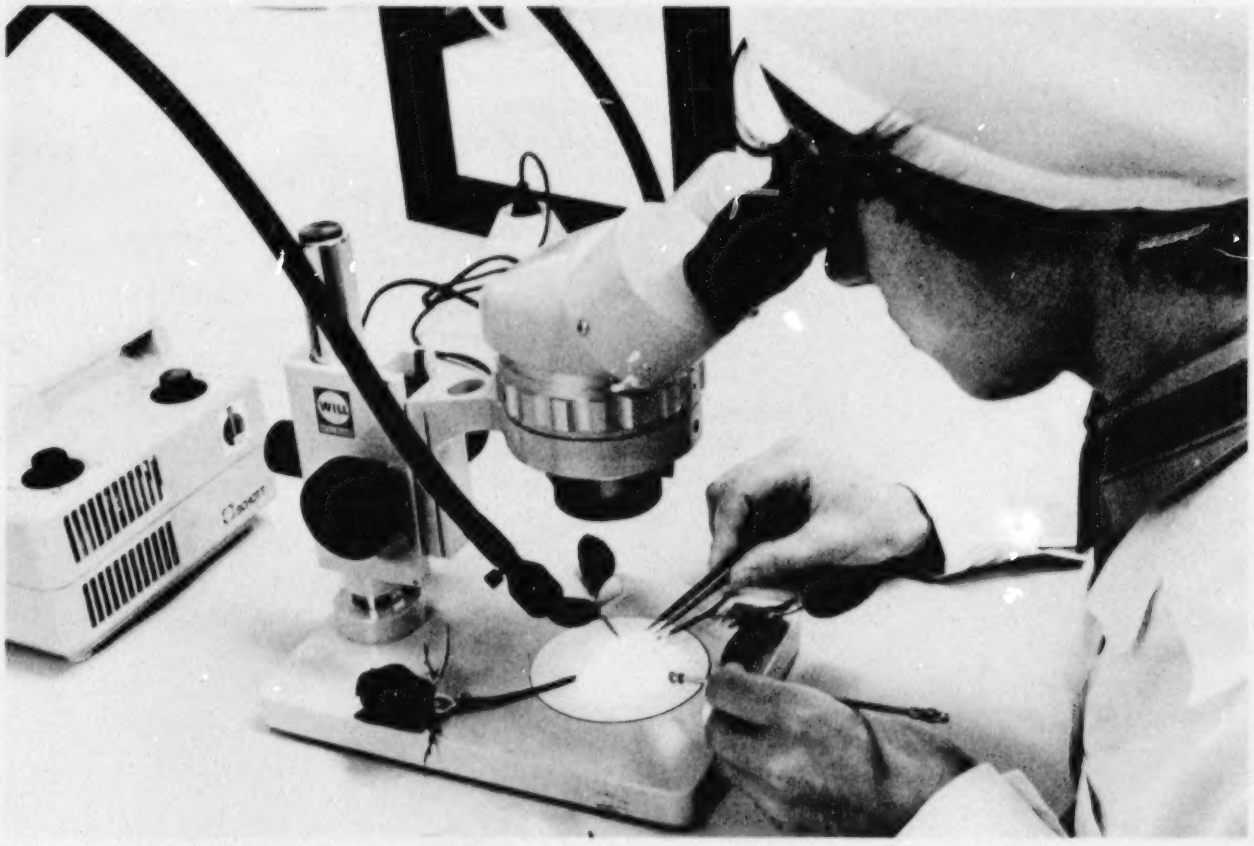
Like the advocates of core academics, the computer advocates want a tougher educational system that insists upon high standards. They want a longer school year, better teachers, more homework. But what they insist upon distinctively is that the computer must be at the center of the new curriculum. Students need to learn about computers, their capabilities and their various applications, of course; but more than that, they argue, the computer should be an essential part of the educational process and one that is used to teach even familiar subjects in new ways.

As an educational tool, computers hold real promise. Studies show that in elementary mathematics and language arts, students learn at a faster rate when using a computer than when taught by traditional techniques. If we are to take advantage of the special capabilities of computers, they should be introduced into the grade school when mathematics and language skills are first being taught. In this way, students quickly grasp the many uses of computers.

Unlike equipment that is designed to do a single task — such as a typewriter — the computer is capable of many tasks. It does what its users tell it to do. To develop in students full awareness of its potential uses is one of the central tasks of education today. In the words of Andrew R. Molnar of the National Science Foundation: "The computer, with its enormous power and speed, has acted as a great catalyst to scientific discovery. It has become an amplifier of human thinking, the tool for complex problem-solving, and the repository for huge quantities of data, information, and knowledge."

In effect, the computer is an educational system all by itself. Remarkably and fortunately, computers have the capacity to stimulate the imagination and hold the interest of students. At a junior high school in Dade County, Florida, a new microcomputer brought some startling results. As the principal of that school reports, "A number of students — hitherto identified simply as bright and hard working — were suddenly gaining schoolwide recognition as the computer 'whiz kids.' Many other youngsters were asking to come early, to give up their lunch periods, and to stay late for additional computer time. The demands became so heavy that our computer instructor had to develop a daily schedule to insure equitable sharing of the computer. He found himself routinely remaining two hours after school to supervise youngsters hard at work in the computer lab."

To the computer advocates, the emergence of this new technology is comparable to the launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957. It is a major challenge to our educational



Jacques Pavlovsky SYGMA

If the schools are concerned with preparing students for future occupations, training for the new technologies is essential.

system. The country rose to the challenge with Sputnik. It improved its science and mathematics courses. Serious efforts were undertaken to upgrade the quality of teaching in these areas, as well as the curriculum itself. Now the country must again reshape its educational system to rise to the challenge of a tool that transforms the learning process as well as the workplace.

THE COSTS OF COMPUTERS

The question that needs to be addressed, then, is what would be required to produce a new generation of students who are computer-literate and attuned to a highly technological society. What will it cost us, and what may we have to give up?

The first concern of many is that we might thoughtlessly give up some of those more traditional studies that have molded the minds and inspired the imagination of countless generations in the past. Even for the quickest and brightest children, there isn't time to learn everything — and the computerized school will face difficult choices. The computer itself can tell stories, teach languages, and even offer games that provide compelling instruction in civics, ethics and the social sciences. But it is nonetheless a programmed, electronic machine. "If we don't teach the skills to understand and transmit our culture, which is a literary one," writes Rita Kramer in the American Federation of Teachers' *American Educator*, "how will it be carried on?"

> Those long, slow hours of childhood are for reading and thinking, the puzzling and fantasies that give definition to the developing self. Books — the ones that have stood the test of time — open the world of the past without which no one understands the present, the world of heroes and quests in which the child sees reflections of himself and his desires. The same questions, the same conflicts have been around for generations. Some answers have proved better than others, and they, along with a measure of delight and the ambiguity that enlarges the mind and resonates in later life are in the books . . ."

To the people who nevertheless regard this as something that the schools must do to prepare students for tomorrow's

workplace, and to maintain a competitive position in the world economy, those risks are far outweighed by the potential benefits of doing so. Yet installing computers in every public school in America — and not just one computer but enough to give the student body hands-on experience with this technological wonder — is undeniably an expensive proposition. Someone will have to pay for training the teachers to become skilled in the use of computers, both as teaching devices and informational resources. In effect, the schools which follow that path will encounter the same problems that industry faces when it retools. The first step to computer literacy is teachers who themselves are computer-literate. The costs of the hardware and the costs of minimum training may be more than many school districts can support. And the costs of keeping teachers who are skilled enough in science and technology to teach it well may be beyond that of any school budget.

The masters of today's technology, especially those whose own creative imaginations are fired by it, are seldom underpaid. The most profitable industry runs upon their skills. But the average teacher's salary, after twelve years in the profession, is only $17,000. Teachers typically start at between $10,000 and $13,000 a year — which may explain why fewer and fewer distinguished college graduates take up the job and why, according to the National Commission, fewer than one-third of U.S. high schools offer physics taught by qualified teachers.

Various ideas have been put forward and debated in an effort to attract and keep competent young people in the teaching profession. One of them is to introduce the new category of "master teacher" — a rank for especially capable teachers rewarded by several thousand dollars a year in additional pay. Another is to offer merit pay for excellence. Many teachers are skeptical about these suggestions. They fear that in a poorly paid profession, favoritism or political considerations will influence these special awards. But teachers' groups are generally receptive to this idea provided that teachers themselves have a say in the selection process, and provided that they keep "master teachers" in the classroom.

"Much of the Japanese success in the workplace appears attributable to what happens before people get to the workplace: to the effectiveness of Japanese primary and secondary education."
—People and Productivity: A Challenge to Corporate America

Teacher unions point out that the prospect of $20,000 a year after a few years is still not going to attract a young graduate who can start a career at double that salary after a year in business school, or a few years in law school rather than teacher's college.

Both proponents and critics of high-tech education agree that a monumental effort will be required to get competent subject-matter specialists into the classroom. The occasional part-time instructor from the staff of a concerned major corporation will not do the job; merit pay for more effective teachers will not, by any reasonable stretch of the imagination, provide the good teachers we need. And if we had the teachers, what would we sacrifice next to pay for the equipment that modern science and technology demand?

Courtesy of the National Education Association

"We have to judge the performance of our schools against the standard of what other countries are doing, and what our country is going to need in the years ahead."

For example, as reported by the *New York Times*, the Newark school system has recognized the importance of computer literacy, but the budget allows for computer systems in only three of the city's fifty elementary schools. Specialists estimate that one thousand terminals are needed there if students are to become computer literate by eighth grade, but only 25 are presently available. It is not likely that the Newark school system will quickly be able to supply the more than nine hundred other terminals that it could use.

"Educational services for the poor and disadvantaged impose taxes on productive community members. Business and prosperous residents have every incentive to leave a community where the tax burden for educating children of poor, disadvantaged residents is high." For this reason, a recent report from the Twentieth Century Fund points out, it is not easy to finance programs locally in cities like Newark.

So it may be that if the nation as a whole is to become computer-literate and train all of its young people to cope in a highly competitive, high-tech world, then we shall need to invest more money in training and equipment — more federal money. This is not a good time for new expenditures. The economy is in bad shape. The federal deficit this year is already $200 billion. Yet in a Gallup Poll taken early this summer, 45% of those questioned said they would favor more money for public education and teacher training "even if that means my taxes will go up." And close to a third expressed the view that the money should be raised by the federal government. Obviously, many concerned citizens and political leaders believe that ours is a national crisis and has to be addressed nationally. We met the Sputnik challenge by a national effort and carefully directed federal funds. No less of an effort, they argue, is called for today.

But even if funding does become available to all of our schools, there will still be better and worse equipped districts, and some will draw better teachers than others. The more ambitious our curriculum becomes, the more marked will be the problem of equity that plagues us already.

If we are to be realistic about introducing the computer and the study of science and technology into the nation's classrooms, some people say, we'd better face the fact that it will encourage elitism. In the rush to prepare students to use the computer, the emphasis will be on those who do it best. What of those who are not as quick, those whose talents lie elsewhere? In responding to Sputnik, the country concentrated on producing students who were more knowledgeable about science and math. The result is that the top 5 percent of American students are now better prepared in science and math than ever before, while the remaining 95 percent are less well prepared than they used to be. The same elitist division could occur as a result of a concerted effort to bring the American school system into the computer age.

Indeed, there are concerned educators and parents who insist that the nation's need for advanced study in the physical and biological sciences should force us to identify and advance the most able students as early as possible. That practice has long been followed in Europe and Japan, but in the United States we have long favored the comprehensive school and a common school experience. Should that now be questioned in the interests of national progress?

4

TEACHING THE EXCEPTIONAL STUDENT

In a New York City coffee shop, a waitress, overhearing several of her customers talk about the problems of the city's educational system, interrupted to ask if they had any advice for her. Her teenage son, she explained, had learning difficulties. He had been put into a special class in school, but it was clear to her and to her son, whose experience was both difficult and discouraging, that the help he was receiving was inadequate. The school officials admitted as much, saying it was the best that they could do. If she wanted more, they explained, then she would just have to find a private school specially equipped to deal with her son's learning problems.

"What am I going to do?" she asked. "I'm already holding down two jobs. I can't afford a private school. My son is getting worse and worse. I thought public schools were for everybody."

Special students, such as this woman's son — a learning-impaired teenager— pose a real dilemma for the schools. It is a dilemma that virtually every school system has to face.

In the ongoing debate about the main tasks of the nation's schools, some people feel very strongly that the schools must serve everyone — not by acting as if they are all alike but by responding to their individual differences, their special problems and special gifts. In a democracy, particularly one as heterogeneous as ours, the schools must respect the human worth of every child and must be prepared to treat each child — no matter how exceptional that student is — as an individual. People who take this position insist that it is the central task of the schools to make sure that all children receive the same basic education and have the chance to excel in the areas of their individual skills and interests. This educational commitment, say its advocates, is nothing less than a commitment to American equality, diversity, and excellence.

> **"The schools have a fundamental obligation to meet the learning needs of *all* of our students, no matter how exceptional they are."**

But equality, diversity and excellence are three very different things. It is not easy to achieve all three. Does the goal of equality require everyone to study the same subjects in the same classrooms? Or does diversity demand different schools and different curricula to meet different needs?

Supporters of the exceptional student recognize that there are many kinds of exceptions. Meeting each one on its own terms is a difficult, expensive, time-consuming task. But so, says this segment of the educational community, is the democratic process. Here we will consider three types of exceptions — the handicapped, the bilingual student, and the gifted.

THE HANDICAPPED: AMERICAN EQUALITY

In 1975, an almost unanimous Congress — only seven Congressmen and seven Senators said no — passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which amounted to a Bill of Rights for handicapped students.

Before the passage of that law, schools tended to shunt the students they classified as handicapped into special classes where

Courtesy of the National Education Association

they typically got something less than a full education. If parents objected, they had only their own powers of persuasion to fall back on.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act — which built upon state court decisions in Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia, and on the actions of several state legislatures — changed all that. The Act made three main points: that all handicapped children had the right to the same free public education that was available to all other American children, that parents had a right to challenge the schools in their treatment of handicapped children, and that school systems should make every effort to incorporate handicapped children into the regular school program — to "mainstream" them.

Two arguments influenced the passage of the act. One argument was that the classifications imposed on many handicapped children were arbitrary or incorrect. In many cases, handicaps did not diminish the intellectual capacity of children even though they might make it less convenient for them to respond to instruction under all the usual circumstances of school life. Another argument affirmed the principle that every American child is entitled to a free public education and that the prime task of the schools is to educate all students equally.

The reasoning that led to the 1975 law, its supporters maintain, remains just as forceful today. They do not deny that educating these pupils and integrating them into regular school

"American schools have to be committed not only to excellence, but also to providing a quality education for *all* students—whatever their special problems or gifts. Providing for all students on their own terms is a difficult, expensive, time-consuming task."

THE COST OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

How much does it cost to educate students with special disabilities? How do such costs compare with the costs of educating regular students? The most up-to-date source on such questions is a study published in 1982, based upon a survey conducted in 1977-78. The Rand Corporation examined 46 school districts in 14 states, and interviewed 900 teachers. The study, *The Cost of Special Education*, came up with these findings:

- ★ **When the study was conducted five years ago, the cost of educating a regular student was $1,650. The cost of educating a handicapped student was more than twice that amount—$3,577.**
- ★ **The cost of educating special students varied according to their disability. The annual cost of educating a speech-impaired child in 1977-78 was $2,253, about one-third more than regular students cost. The cost of educating a functionally blind student was $9,664, or about six times the cost of educating a regular student**
- ★ **Between 1977-78 and 1980-81, the estimated cost of educating a regular student went up 37 percent. Assuming that the cost of educating a special student rose by the same percent, then the cost of educating a regular student in 1980-81 was $2,638, and the cost of educating a special student was $4,898.**

"The problem is that once we make a commitment to meet the special needs of students, there is no end to the demands placed on schools, and on taxpayers."

programs is an additional economic burden on school systems. They insist, however, that this is a case in which rights are more important than costs. Handicapped pupils — including both the physically and emotionally affected — have been variously estimated at 10 to 13 percent of the student population, which is about the same number that is considered functionally illiterate. In debates over what the priorities of the schools should be, those who feel strongly about the rights of special students pose this hard question: Why should the functionally illiterate be considered more important than the hard-of-hearing, the deaf, the visually impaired, or children with emotional or learning disorders? That some handicapped children might not keep pace with the majority, or might not ever be eligible for many of the jobs society can offer — these are not valid arguments, they say, for depriving them of comparable education. Special cases require special care, and it is the task of government to care for those who have special needs.

THE BILINGUAL: AMERICAN DIVERSITY

English is a second language to about 7 percent of the American school population — some three and a half million students. In Los Angeles, they are a majority in the public schools. Without the aid of bilingual teaching programs, these pupils, in the words of a unanimous 1974 Supreme Court decision, "are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education." Since that decision, ten states have made bilingual education mandatory, and sixteen others have authorized the development of bilingual programs.

Strictly speaking, bilingual education requires that all instruction be offered in both English and the other language that is spoken by the children concerned. It is part of America's commitment to provide an equal opportunity to learn. It also affirms the rich American tradition of cultural diversity. "I hear America singing," wrote Walt Whitman. It has always sung in many voices, and bilingual education, its supporters argue, is one way these voices are sustained and encouraged.

About 70 percent of the children in bilingual programs are Spanish speaking. The next largest group are Asians — which includes Koreans, Vietnamese, and Cambodians. The remainder speak languages as varied as Arabic and Russian — some 70 different languages in all. Without bilingualism, say its supporters, children who through no fault of their own do not speak English would be denied the education that is their right, and America would deny its tradition of pluralism. Bilingualism is not a frill but an approach with strong cultural roots and a program that enriches American life.

THE GIFTED: AMERICAN EXCELLENCE

About two and a half million students — approximately 5 per-

cent of the school population — are classified as gifted. This means that they have unusual analytic or creative talents. The Director of the Department of Education's Office for the Gifted and Talented writes: "They are the future Albert Einsteins, Ludwig von Beethovens, Pablo Picassos, and Martin Luther Kings."

But like the handicapped and the bilingual, the gifted present the school system with a special problem: How can you educate the gifted — and encourage them to fulfill their potential — in a school system that is basically egalitarian? Today, as some people argue, the gifted are more important than ever to public education. They are models of the best, examples of what can be achieved. If American public education cannot encourage the gifted, then the nation is missing a real opportunity to encourage excellence everywhere. Gifted children may be our best long-range investment in education.

Of course, gifted children do not create immediate problems; nor have they had a vocal constituency organized to attract attention, sympathy and dollars from public policymakers. Their claims have not been legislated or judged. But when the gifted are not served by the public schools, then — as now frequently happens — many leave for private schools. Significantly, the movement of students from public to private schools has been dubbed "bright flight." This movement can be stopped, it is argued, by a concerted effort to give the gifted the opportunity to exercise their skills and talents in the public school system. If this is not done, the simple truth is that the public school system has no place for excellence — and it will become a system for the second best.

Teresa Fasolino

Many feel strongly that the schools must provide for exceptional students, no matter what it costs to do so.

THE COST OF EXCEPTIONAL STUDENTS

The educational commitment to exceptional students gives rise to a simple question: Are there enough teachers, enough time, enough money, and enough resources to give every exceptional student an education that is different from but equivalent to (or in the case of the gifted, better than) that received by most other students? If we train teachers to work with the emotionally disabled, will we also have enough money and time — and the people — to train teachers to use computers, or to teach science and higher math? Similarly, if we build the facilities and provide the services that are necessary for the physically handicapped — such as playgrounds equipped with ramps for wheelchairs, sign language "translators" for the deaf — which of our other needs may have to be sacrificed as a consequence?

In many school systems, the problem is that once the principle of meeting the special needs of the students is affirmed, there seems to be no end to the demands placed on schools — and the taxpayers who support them. If the schools agree to meet the needs of the physically disabled, how about those with emotional problems? If special programs and teachers are found for the intellectually gifted, how about those who are gifted in the arts, or talented athletes? Where, in other words, will the line be drawn? Just how far does the obligation of the schools to meet the special needs of students extend? What it comes down to, finally, is the conflict between our commitment, as a matter of principle, to the exceptional student and an intensely practical concern for not trying to stretch the school budget too far. No matter how appealing the principle may be, we must ask whether the return justifies the expenditure in this time of scarce resources.

There are other considerations as well. Critics of bilingual education today, for example, do not dispute the necessity of

providing the best possible education for Spanish speaking students, but they question the wisdom of providing education, almost throughout the curriculum, in two languages. Total immersion in an English speaking environment rather than special teaching in another language, they say, is both cheaper and more effective. Or failing that, the teaching of English through heavily concentrated study, they argue, may cost far less and in the long run produce students better able to cope in the adult world. Again, the handicapped — at least those with some handicaps — do sometimes require special facilities and services. Are such children not more easily managed and better served if they are taught outside the mainstream? In the name of mainstreaming, as a report from the Twentieth Century Fund puts it, "Handicapped children have been taken from therapeutic settings to become marginal members of regular classrooms." Aren't their prospects inevitably limited in some ways — and if so, why should the school system be asked to overcome that unfortunate truth?

To many observers, such arguments already reveal a people turning their backs on the commitment to equality that has driven so much of our country's social legislation over the past twenty years. But the justification for "special" education becomes even harder to grapple with when it is applied to the needs of that exceptionally gifted 5% of our children. For advocates are asking only that we make extra effort to make an ordinary education available to handicapped and foreign speaking children, an education readily offered to every other child. But for the gifted, advocates ask an education that is, by definition, better than that which is provided to everybody else. And it is an education that will also be likely to pave the way to greater rewards in adult life. Equality is not the goal of special education for the gifted — though nobody denies that the opportunity to qualify for it should be available to everyone.

"If the schools agree to meet the needs of the disabled, the learning-impaired, and the gifted, how much farther should they go to meet the needs of exceptional students?"

EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY

Other countries — Britain, France, Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union among them — have long offered a special opportunity to their more talented children, and they single them out of the mainstream at surprisingly early ages. At a time when international competition is proving tougher, the move to cultivate our best has plenty of supporters. A special lobby for the gifted is hardly needed.

But proponents of special schools or special classes for the gifted in the public school fear that if special arrangements are not made, then the gifted will turn their backs on the public school system, leaving it poorer and weaker.

That is no idle fear, for private school enrollment has increased. Some people are strongly inclined to provide tax relief to parents who choose to pay for private education. To many parents, private schools now seem the only way to ensure a promising child's education when the public schools appear to be in decline. Unfortunately, however, if the brightest students leave the public schools — and especially if public funds, in the form of tax exemptions, go with them — then the public school system itself will command less support and lose one good reason to improve itself. Then all of our children at public schools will be the poorer.

Incidentally, although only 17 percent of the American population as a whole consists of minorities, they comprise 26 percent of those in school. Within a decade, it will be more than 30 percent. If the quality of the schools declines, minorities will be affected even more than other Americans.

This is a troubling problem for a democratic nation. We care about equality; but we care also about excellence — and when the gifted are "mainstreamed" the stream can prove too shallow for them to swim in. Some of the nation's largest school systems do provide special schools for the intellectually or artistically gifted — so that talented children in the public schools have opportunities comparable to those found in expensive private schools. But entrance to these schools is highly selective,

Courtesy of the National Education Association

highly competitive; and those who are accepted are getting an education that isn't available in other public schools.

Some people argue that the public schools should provide a common experience to all American children — and that such a common experience is all the more vital as our society grows larger and more complex. One of the main functions of the school is to provide one experience for all children in their formative years. That, simply, is society's obligation: To make a basic American education — tuned to the times, of course — available. Public education, the argument goes, cannot be everything to everybody; it need only provide one thing for all who need it. If some children can't keep up with it, then special care may have to be taken of them, but society has no obligation to educate them equally. Similarly, if that education which the state provides does not satisfy others who are exceptionally gifted, then theirs is the privilege of paying for (or winning) whatever other kind of schooling better exploits their talents.

There is room for argument here: Should the public schools provide one education for all and let those who need or want something different go elsewhere? Or should it provide the education each can use? And do we feel the same way when the issue is talented students . . . or the handicapped . . . or those who speak little English . . . or other exceptional children? The answer may depend upon the part we think the public schools see fit to play in shaping our society itself — and that is what we should turn to now.

In Chicago, Chinese students learn math; in Houston, Spanish-speaking students learn about rockets; in La Place, Louisiana, a French-speaking kindergarten class learns French. Today, according to Federal law, children who speak in any of 74 native languages have a right to be taught in that language in public school. Bilingual programs reach over 500,000 children and cost over $700 million a year. Estimates made in 1980 suggest that 3,600,000 children in the United States need bilingual teaching to help them master the school curriculum.

5

THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM: MOLDING CHARACTER, TEACHING VALUES

Early this summer, President Reagan voiced a concern that many Americans share when he spoke out against the disarray into which the school curriculum has fallen. He singled out two kinds of courses that, in his judgment, indicate how misguided the efforts of the schools are. President Reagan referred disparagingly to offerings such as instruction in cheerleading, and courses in "bachelor life."

That comment touched off a lively exchange about what is truly important in the school curriculum. As Richard Cohen, a *Washington Post* columnist replied, "when it comes to cheerleading, the President has a point. But bachelor life is another matter."

Cohen may have had his tongue partly in his cheek; but he went on to argue seriously that courses that help young people prepare for independent living — like courses that help students to understand what contributes to successful marriage and family life — can teach some very valuable lessons. Then he compared the value of a course in "bachelor life" to the value of high school algebra, which is commonly regarded as a basic mathematical skill: "It is a fact, after all," writes Cohen, "that most people function very well without ever trying to figure out which of two trains is going faster — taking into consideration a head wind which we will call X, just for the fun of it."

> **"The schools should reflect the things we value. They should teach young people to be caring, to be responsible, to respect authority, and to have a healthy sense of self-esteem."**

The point is that as often as people say that education should return to "the basics," there is not much agreement about what is truly basic in the schooling experience. In President Reagan's judgment, a course in "bachelor life" is a mere frill, a waste of time for both students and teachers. Mr. Cohen's perspective is representative of those who feel that one of the chief tasks of the schools should be to prepare students for real life, to help shape their character. There are many people who feel that this objective is at least as important as transmitting academic skills and knowledge. To them, many of the non-academic courses offered in the nation's schools today help students to develop life skills, to learn the attitudes that enable them to become responsible members of their communities.

It is difficult, of course, to agree on what courses in a school do help shape character: once you start deliberately trying to teach the values by which students can be prepared for life in America today, you find surprising differences of opinion about which values are really important. We'll return to that problem in a moment. But first let us look at the fundamental purpose of such courses and try to understand why they have come to take over such a large portion of the school day.

THE MAKING OF AMERICANS

It is important to recognize, first of all, that courses intended to teach values, and social or practical skills for today's world, are advocated by those who believe that the making of Amer-

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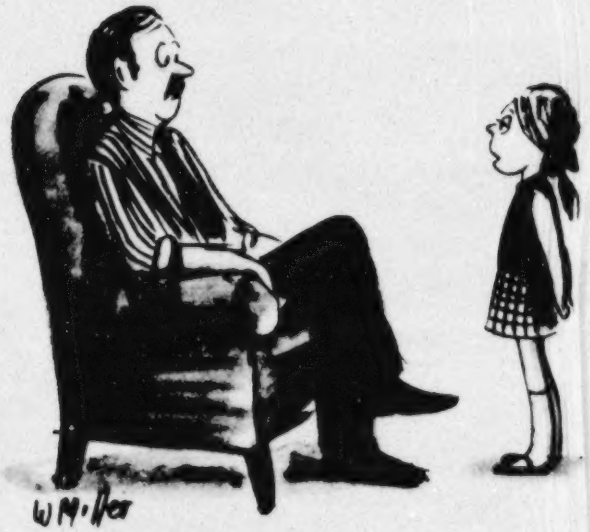
icans is one of the school's chief tasks. This, they argue, is why we had public schools in the first place. It used to be called the common school, and it was the place where, for a short period of their lives, all of our children could grow together. There they could learn the skills they needed to become employable adults. Even more important, there they could learn the common values of adult society and something about the great principles that hold us together as a people and make us — Americans — different from other societies. And finally, there they could learn some social skills (fire drill and driver education, even) that we have to know if we are to have healthy and safe communities.

A century ago, perhaps, things may have been as simple as that theory. In a homogenous society it was clear what newcomers needed to know — be they children or immigrants. And a great deal of the knowledge could be communicated through a basic curriculum. A few great books, a little American history with readings in the Constitution, and McGuffy's Reader (a text book that managed to convey society's basic values while teaching reading and writing) — these took care of the values. And a society that still wasn't very mobile had little need to teach any social practicalities beyond those that children learned around the house and the marketplace. "The basics," therefore, taught children what they needed to know socially at the same time as they were learning their reading, writing and arithmetic. And the church and the family were strong enough to reinforce the school's work.

Today, many parents and teachers argue, the purpose of the school has not changed. Its purpose is still nation-building. In school, and there alone, in just a few years of leisure before they must start to compete for a livelihood, our children can learn the principles by which they will live. There they'll learn to become reliable grown-ups and public-spirited citizens. They'll learn about responsibility, about cause and effect in social and business behavior, about our common civic life. They'll learn in school, where mistakes and failures are not irreparable. And they'll learn together.

In sum, the advocates of "values" in the school's curriculum are not frivolous. But the curricula that different educators have put together to accomplish their goals has become very



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"What did I learn in school today? Well, I learned that Paris is groovy, Mexico swings, and although Ms. Beatty had a wild, far-out time in Montreal with that guy who picks her up at school on his motorcycle, she doesn't want to marry him."

different from the basic academic curriculum that in decades past also taught values. Sometimes the courses (whatever their importance) rely very little on academic skills — driver education for example, and even some courses on sex, growing up, local government or the marketplace. At other times courses that offer to produce capable young Americans for the modern world may be seriously academic and provide grounding in philosophy, history, economics, ethics and the political and social sciences. Either way, they are a long way from reading, writing and arithmetic.

Some of them deal directly with the principles of democratic government — civics. In fact, they can entail the careful study of history, or merely involve visits to legislatures or courthouses, and mock legislative sessions. Broadly, they are thought of as citizen education.

Some of them concern the practicalities or the ethics of contemporary life. They range all the way from considerations of sex and the family to business management and the principles of the private enterprise system. They, too, can include role playing and field work, academic sociology and economics, or just gossip; but their focus is essentially on adjustment to adult life.

And some of them, finally, address much more directly the matter of values. Their concern is for ethics, morality and belief, tradition and the American way of life. Perhaps more obviously than other kinds, these classes try to secure that sense of shared values without which — so the advocates argue — no society can grow and prosper. And like all the other courses that claim to nurture good citizens, they can be thoughtful or frivolous, learned or simple.

THE SCHOOLS IN AN ERA OF MORAL CONFUSION

"As often as people say that education should return to the basics, there is not much agreement about what is truly basic in the schooling experience."

The advocates of education-for-character maintain that many of these courses, even though they are sometimes non-academic, are all the more important today because traditional means of transmitting values have been seriously undermined. Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching writes that "a shift in family life has caused the school to take on responsibilities of the home. Teachers become counselors to students whose parents are caught in a divorce. And schools find little support at home when tougher standards are imposed."

Over the past two decades, several factors have eroded the traditional process by which values are passed down from one generation to another. Churches no longer influence values and life-styles as directly as they did; and governments and other public institutions command less and less respect. The nuclear family — once the stronghold of social values — plays a very different role today from its role in the past. The number of children affected by divorce has doubled in the last twenty years;

a great many spend at least part of their childhood living with just one parent. And families are less likely than they used to be to demand that children live lives just like their parents. In a situation of emotional turmoil and divided allegiances, it is far more difficult for the family to present or to represent all the best values of the society.

And as these historic institutions have lost some of their former influence in shaping the values of children, so the mass media have become far more influential. In many ways the media — television, the movies, the recording industry — are very effective in transmitting values to an eager audience of young people and have an impact almost as great as did the church, say, in colonial times. But the themes of the media focus on easy success rather than hard work, self-aggrandizement rather than social responsibility, the momentary and dramatic event, lawlessness and violence. How can such themes help a young person become a responsible adult?

Many of the people who are concerned about the schools' responsibility for teaching social values and shaping the character of young people feel that the schools must perform that role because no other institution today is doing it very well. In the words of educator Mary Conway Kohler, "without debating whether the responsibility is appropriate, we must face the stark fact that schools are probably the only remaining institutions that reach all young people and hence can help them make the transition to adulthood. Because of compulsory attendance, schools have an unmistakable opportunity to teach young people responsibility as well as reading, caring as well as computation, self-esteem as well as science." In other words, society needs its schools to lay down the rules of the game and to train the young players. Like the draft during World War II, they are the instruments by which young people can be brought together to master those skills on which the survival of our society depends.

This strong conviction that the shaping of character and the teaching of values must be a deliberate part of the school curriculum has led to many experimental efforts like the school program called *Quest*. Now being used by more than 150,000 students in over 750 schools in 29 states, *Quest* is an attempt to teach students how to relate to each other and how to handle their most pressing real life problems. The *Quest* curriculum was developed from a survey of high school students that asked them to describe "some of the things that you struggle with most." On the basis of their answers, ten areas of concern were identified — among them getting along with one's family, making and keeping friends, and handling money. *Quest* uses group discussion, journal keeping, interviews, and role playing to help students develop skills in solving problems, resolving conflict, and understanding themselves.

To the advocates of education-for-character, such programs are vitally important. Their view is that schools must prepare people to think clearly, not just for job-related skills, but more broadly for responsible lives as parents and citizens. Being a successful adult means relating to people, understanding oneself, belonging to a community. It is the task of the schools to provide an educational experience that recognizes that broad goal of education.

THE DIFFICULTY OF EDUCATING FOR CHARACTER

But many people have misgivings about what can go wrong when the schools pursue this apparently unexceptionable goal.

For one thing, it can be divisive. There is by no means a consensus about which values are the "right" ones. Think, for example, of what "good citizenship" means. Is a good citizen one who obeys the laws without question or one who vigorously defends people's rights? Or is it someone who is willing to sacrifice his or her own interest for the interest of society? Since different people mean different things when they refer to citizenship, the schools run the risk of triggering heated disputes when they teach about it.

And the debate about that subject — citizenship education — is mild when compared to the controversies that have attended the introduction of courses in family life and sex education, courses that raise subjects to which both parents and children may be mutually sensitive, and to which are attached historic taboos, principles, convictions and prejudices. For every parent who insists that schools must tackle subjects that are ill-taught at home and even more poorly taught by the child's peers, there is another who insists that such subjects call for moral guidance and insist that's not the teacher's province.

"Because of its central role in the maintenance of our society, the teaching of good citizenship should be a major priority. We must not lose sight of the overarching goal of education, which is to develop good citizens."
—T. H. Bell, U.S. Secretary of Education

CIVIC SKILLS AND THE SCHOOLS

In China recently, the government declared a "civic virtue" month, during which everybody was to clean messy public spaces like parks and streets, be courteous, and in general make public life tidier and more pleasant. To get the month going, the head of the Communist Party and several of his associates descended on a public park in Peking, brooms in hand, and started sweeping. Which is one way to initiate a program of civic virtue.

The way to do it in the United States, argue some people who believe that the schools should teach and instill values, is through the schools. Civic virtue, they maintain, is central to the well-being of a democratic nation. It must be cultivated in the schools.

A recent proposal for encouraging civic responsibility has come from sociologist Amitai Etzioni. He proposes that after the fourth year of high school, all students should spend an additional year in national service. This year of service would replace the first year of college or would provide a year between school and work for those who are not college-bound.

He sees many advantages to such a year of service —among them its social usefulness, its potential psychological impact on the individual (it could enhance an "individual's self-respect, sense of worth and outlook on the future"), and the opportunity it provides to develop a work skill or gain practical experience.

But the cost of such a program would be formidable—about $7,000 a student. "If every American who reaches eighteen were to participate—a very far-fetched assumption—it would cost an estimated $21 billion a year." Etzioni, a strong advocate of the program as an effective way to bring about "membership in a civil community," concludes that "it can be seriously considered only if there is great public support for it, and parallel commitment by Congress and the administration."

But — and here is what makes this so difficult a topic for us to dismiss lightly — the decision to teach or not to teach such subjects entails a value judgment in itself and attaches a "value" or a point of view to the school. The decision to teach no value courses at all communicates one thing; the decision to teach an objective (i.e. "value free") course about ethical values communicates quite another. The decision of a school librarian to include one book in the library reveals the librarian's values; the decision by a group of parents to ban the same book reveals another set of values. And it has not at this time been decided everywhere how much of a say parents should have in what their children read at school.

Even the decision to eliminate driver education from one school on Long Island recently ran afoul of parents' expectations of the school — and that brings up the most difficult question of all. If we want our schools to prepare our children for adult life as American citizens, and if we see that as demanding a common educational experience, then who is to decide what that experience is to be? Perhaps a majority of us do think that the school is supposed to teach kids so that they can perpetuate our society — so they can take our places eventually, nobly, creatively, ethically. But can we agree on what this society is or ought to be? Even then, can we agree on what to teach the children so that they will be best able to carry it on?

To make matters even more complicated, the character of students is not only shaped by the direct teaching of values, or by courses in social, business and political life. The classroom experience itself shapes character. In the 1960s, radical critics of the school argued that classrooms were frequently joyless places where rules were established by one person and imposed on students who sat in rows of desks like soldiers at attention. The result they said, was an atmosphere that thwarted learning and a teaching process that fostered authoritarian attitudes.

Partly in response to such criticism, many schools loosened the lines of authority, gave students more freedom to pick their courses and to determine school policies. The intention of such reforms, writes historian Diane Ravitch, "was to make schools a friendlier place, a place that encourages self-fullfillment in a wide variety of interests, an institution characterized by cooperation rather than striving." People hoped that such changes would "unleash student initiative and energies and lead to greater academic achievement than in the bad old days of academic coercion."

Today, however, there is a sense — apparently more and more widely shared — that those reforms didn't have their intended effect. In fact, they may have led to the development of attitudes and values that are quite the opposite of what was intended. Less emphasis on academics has led to diminished achievement in academics (as indicated by declining achievement scores). Attempts to redefine the teacher's role have led to diminished respect for authority (as indicated by growing

Courtesy of the National Education Association

discipline problems). As a result of allowing students to choose their own program, respect for intellectual discipline, for education itself, seems to have diminished. (One response to this situation has been the call from many parents to restore discipline in the classroom, and to insist upon respect for authority. For several years past, the annual Gallup Poll has found discipline in the schools to be one of the major worries of parents across the nation.)

President Reagan's comments about instruction in cheerleading and courses on bachelor life have shown the concern there is about attempts to prepare students more broadly for adult life. For each hour of the school day that is devoted to those nonacademic courses, there is one hour less to devote to such subjects as algebra, writing, or learning about computers. There are few other institutions in our society, reply some people, devoted to shaping character; but thereupon others respond that the schools are the only place where young people learn academic subjects like algebra and writing. If the schools do not transmit that information then young people enter the adult world with a severe handicap. No 17-year-old who reads at the level of a sixth grader is likely to have self-esteem; and a high school graduate who does not know enough math to balance his checkbook cannot function very well as an adult.

Those who stress the continuing importance of using the schools to teach values and mold character force us to address some fundamental questions — about what is most important to pass along to the next generation, what nonacademic skills and sensitivities people should have, and whether the schools are the proper vehicle for teaching them.

We can "make Americans" their way — or we can try to train competent adults along the lines suggested in Chapter 2. It may be too costly, and take too much time to try to do both. But our discussion has now come full circle, and we need to see how the options we have been considering balance out.

6

PICKING PRIORITIES FOR THE NATION'S SCHOOLS

Over the years, America's schools have shouldered a growing number of responsibilities. They have attempted to develop the academic skills of their students — to teach children to read and write the English language, to express themselves clearly, to think logically, to grasp and command the basic elements of arithmetic and mathematics, to observe the society they live in and the natural world they inhabit with some understanding of its structure and its laws. The schools have also attempted to equip their students to understand and make use of advancing technology. In the 1960s and 70s, they began with a smattering of courses in film making and video and increased attention to the "visual literacy" of their students; in the 1980s, they face the challenge and the promise of the computer.

As the student population has diversified and as society recognized the special needs of handicapped, gifted, and non-English-speaking students, the schools have attempted — and in many cases were required by law — to provide these students, too, with an opportunity to achieve their educational potential. And in response to national and community concerns, the schools attempted to help pupils develop the sensitivity, the sense of purpose, the depth of character, and the "coping skills" to live as responsible adults in a changing and confusing world. Treading a wary and sometimes stormy path, many schools have offered courses in marriage and the family, sex education, religion, civil rights, environmentalism, ethics, recent social change, and other subjects which, at their core, involve questions of values.

> "If the schools try to do everything, it's likely that they won't do anything very well. The first step toward educational reform is to decide upon priorities."

To many observers, the schools have attempted to do it all, and therein, they say, lies the essence of the problem. In taking on so many differing and difficult tasks, the schools may have gone beyond what can reasonably be expected. They have

Teresa Fasolino

attempted to do everything, and consequently have done nothing well.

In part, the question is one of money. Salaries for teachers do not begin to compete with those offered to bright young graduates by the other professions and by the business world. How many school systems can afford to attract and hold on to high quality and dedicated teachers for the core academics; to enlarge and retrain school staffs to make good use of the new technology; to purchase and service the needed computers; to hire teachers to cover the standard curriculum in Spanish or Chinese or French or Haitian, or other languages that may be required; to hire teachers especially trained to work with children with learning disabilities or behavioral problems, teachers who can "sign" for deaf students or assist the physically handicapped; to hire teachers with the special sensitivity and tact to help students confront and understand the values that guide them and their neighbors?

In another sense, the question is one of time. Even if the school day and school year were extended, as many have proposed, is there enough time to do it all? Will students who learn to use and program computers have time to gain a thorough understanding of history, geography, and literature? Will the student who is mastering the "classic" academic curriculum have time to confront and master the technological "tools" that are changing the American workplace. And will either of them have time to participate in the band or the chorus, to develop their athletic skills, to learn wood-working or silkscreening? And if the schools don't give students the chance to "sample," to dabble, to try out even these less critical elective subjects, doesn't that in itself close doors and narrow a child's perspective, particularly for children whose families cannot provide these experiences?

And in a final sense, the question is one of purpose. Even given unlimited resources and vastly increased quantities of time with students, could and should the schools take on so many varying objectives? While the four "pictures" of education presented in this booklet may not necessarily be incompatible or mutually exclusive, they certainly represent differing perspectives and emphases. To many observers, it seems virtually impossible for teachers, administrators, school boards, and even the students themselves to function effectively when they are pulled in so many directions. Moreover, others question whether the schools are really the best or most appropriate place to achieve some of the stated goals. This question is most frequently and pointedly raised on issues of values. In a world where we won't necessarily agree on what a responsible adult, a good parent, or a caring citizen really is, should we attempt to teach these things in the public schools which, by their very structure and definition, must function as a common ground?

And so the question of what to do about our young people's education becomes increasingly complex. Behind this discussion lurks a question about the value of the public school itself as an institution. Do we need them? Do we need to train teachers more carefully for them and put more money into them? What would our society be like without them? Will they fail or will they grow stronger if we drop any one of the approaches advocated in the chapters of this issue book?

The schools have taken on a difficult task, and in some ways they have done remarkably well. A greater percentage of American children graduate from high school than ever before and more go on to college; equally important, none are turned away. Some would argue that narrowing the goals of the schools would be a mistake grounded in alarmism. There are children and families who benefit and are nourished by each of the public schools' many and varied activities. Curtailing the schools' functions in any area will represent an irretrievable loss for some students.

But equally compelling is the argument that the schools cannot be all things to all people. And that is the choice facing us. Should the schools attempt to cover the agenda as it now stands — ambitious, varied, responsive, and admittedly imperfect? Or is there an urgent need for a more clearly defined purpose with an achievable and realistic goal? If so, what should the scope of that more specific and focused goal be? These are the questions we must consider in examining the achievements, failings, and future of our schools. What do we want our schools to do? What are we willing to pay to support their costs? What kind of Americans do we want our schools to shape?

"Can we improve our schools? Absolutely. The way to do so, however, is not with universal criticisms and universal 'solutions.' The way to do it is to examine meaningfully and state the specific skills, knowledge and attitudes that our students need and don't have."
—Charles W. Fauler

FOR FURTHER READING

Among the recent reports on America's schools, you might look in particular at the report which attracted so much attention this past spring, *A Nation at Risk*, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983. For a recent report based upon an extensive study of schools, see John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983).

For further reading on the position presented in the second section of this issue book, see Burton Yale Pines' *Back to Basics* (New York: William Morrow, 1982). On the problems posed by students with special educational needs, see Kate Long's *Johnny's Such A Bright Boy, What a Shame He's Retarded* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977). On the schools' responsibility for civic education, see Amitai Etzioni's *An Immodest Agenda: Rebuilding America Before the 21st Century* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1983).

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The following materials may be ordered for use with the 1983 National Issues Forum. Please specify quantities for each item in the space provided, fill in complete mailing address, and enclose check payable to: Domestic Policy Association. Orders must be paid in advance or billed to Visa or MasterCard.

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NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM

2. PRIORITIES FOR THE NATION'S SCHOOLS REPORT

Please answer the questions on both sides of this report only *after* you have attended the discussion or read the booklet. Answer them without reference to your earlier answers. Then hand in both reports to the forum moderator, or mail it in to the Domestic Policy Association in the attached prepaid envelope. (In case no envelope is enclosed, you can send these pages to the Domestic Policy Association at 5335 Far Hills Avenue, Dayton, Ohio 45429.)

I Here is a list of things that some people say are not receiving the right amount of emphasis in our schools today. For each item, indicate whether you think it should receive more or less emphasis than it is currently getting, or is the amount of emphasis it is now receiving about right? (Check the appropriate box)

	More	About Right	Less	Not Sure
1. Making sure there is discipline in the classroom — Should this receive more or less emphasis, or is the emphasis it is receiving now about right?	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. Higher pay for teachers — more or less emphasis, or about the same as it gets now?	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. Homework — more or less emphasis, or about the same as it gets now?	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. The basics, such as reading and writing	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. Sports and extracurricular activities	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. Improving the equipment in science labs	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. Using computers and other new technologies of the future	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. Teaching practical skills such as home economics and drivers' education	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Making sure teachers are qualified	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Teaching basic values such as the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Attention to students with special needs such as the handicapped or students with learning disabilities	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. Attention to students who are intellectually gifted	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. Bilingual instruction, especially in communities with large Spanish-speaking populations	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. Teaching job-related skills like how to write a resume	☐	☐	☐	☐
15. Teaching students life skills such as how to be a responsible parent	☐	☐	☐	☐
16. Teaching students science and math	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. How much, if anything, would you be willing to pay in additional taxes every year if that money were used exclusively for education? Would you be willing to pay: (Check the appropriate box)

☐ a. About $100.00 per year in new taxes if that money were used exclusively for education

☐ b. About $50.00 per year

☐ c. I would not be willing to pay more taxes each year if the money were used exclusively for education.

☐ d. Not sure/Don't know

II Suppose that more money were to become available exclusively for education and you could decide how that money would be spent. Below is a list of programs and educational activities where you can increase funding. However, you can target no more than *three* of these for increased resources. Which, if any, would you select? (CHECK NO MORE THAN THREE)

- ☐ 18. Teachers' salaries
- ☐ 19. Programs for students needing bilingual instruction
- ☐ 20. Computer purchase and instruction
- ☐ 21. Helping students prepare for the workplace
- ☐ 22. Programs for students with learning disabilities
- ☐ 23. Programs for practical learning such as home economics, auto mechanics, and drivers' education
- ☐ 24. More emphasis on the basics such as reading and math
- ☐ 25. Magnet schools and special programs for the intellectually gifted
- ☐ 26. Extending the school year
- ☐ 27. More emphasis on science

III Here are four possible candidates for the head of the school system in your community:

Candidate A wants to make sure that every graduate can read and do basic math — even if other priorities have to be ignored.

Candidate B wants the school to buy computers and teach students how to work with them — even if this means a de-emphasis on basic skills

Candidate C would provide special instruction for slow learners, the intellectually gifted, and those who need bilingual instruction — even if this means taking away resources from other programs.

Candidate D feels that because of the break-up of so many families and the declining influence of our churches, the schools should teach basic values such as the difference between right and wrong and the responsibilities of good citizenship, and also place more emphasis on teaching practical skills such as home economics, auto mechanics, and drivers' education.

28. Which candidate would you like to see in charge of your community's schools?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

29. Which candidate would you *least* like to see in charge of your community's schools?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

30. What about for the country as a whole? Which candidate would you like to see as U.S. Secretary of Education?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

31. Which candidate would you *least* like to see as U.S. Secretary of Education?

- ☐ A
- ☐ B
- ☐ C
- ☐ D
- ☐ Not sure

"I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it away from them, but to inform their discretion by education."

Th. Jefferson